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SUBJECT: "Mindanao still open for business"

1. (U) SUMMARY. Signifying the USG's continuing commitment to economic prosperity and stability for Mindanao, the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission (A/DCM) visited the Mindanao province of Zamboanga del Norte where he: delivered the keynote address at the annual Mindanao Business Conference; formally turned-over a computer assistance package to a rural high school; and received a briefing from local leaders on their avian influenza prevention strategy. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Despite being, historically, one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines, Zamboanga del Norte's economic fortunes have been improving over the past few years. The province's successes are due to its relative peacefulness, a small but growing domestic tourism industry, sizable USG and other donor assistance efforts, and the fact that the principal roll-on, roll-off freight port in the province, in its capital city of Dipolog, has become a key link in the GRP's "Strong Republic Nautical Highway System." This has led to dramatic increases in cargo and passenger traffic.

17th Annual Mindanao Business Conference

3. (U) Held this year in Dipolog City, the Mindanao Business Conference is the largest annual gathering of Mindanao's business community. Some 400 business leaders attended the Conference. The Conference serves as a venue for discussing and exploring business and trade opportunities, sharing new developments and best practices, and discussing/proposing ways of fostering a more competitive and attractive business environment in Mindanao. The Dipolog City Chamber of Commerce, in collaboration with the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) was the host and principal organizer of this year's conference. As it has done for most of the previous annual conferences, the USG provided some technical and financial support for this year's Mindanao Business Conference.

4. (U) Delivering the keynote address before a large audience of regional business and political leaders, the A/DCM emphasized the USG's continued support for peace and development in Mindanao and its intention to continue its close and enduring partnerships with local and national government agencies, NGO's, and private businesses. In collaboration with these partners, the USG has supported a wide-ranging assistance effort in Mindanao over the past several years with numerous projects aimed at health and education improvement, better environmental management, improved governance, infrastructure, and expansion of economic opportunity.

USAID Connects Rural High School to Internet

5. (U) Illustrating the USG's commitment to improving education, the A/DCM formally turned over a computer assistance package including 10 computers and a satellite dish needed for internet access to a nearby rural high school. The assistance was provided under USAID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) program. The CLIC program has thus far introduced computer and internet education into almost 700 high schools in Mindanao, in both urban and rural areas, helping to ensure that young people in

Mindanao will be able to compete in a globalizing world. Partnering with the Philippine government, school administrators, and parent-teacher organizations (who assume responsibility for maintaining the computers and paying the monthly internet charges), USAID aims to add hundreds of additional schools to the CLIC network in the next few years.

Working Towards AI Preparedness in Mindanao

¶6. (U) The A/DCM attended a USAID sponsored avian influenza (AI) briefing in a rural municipality near the conference site as part of a pilot project that trains citizens to look for possible signs of AI and to alert local health officials. While the Philippines remains one of three southeast Asian countries free of AI, USAID and its local partners assist vulnerable regions and communities to provide public awareness and community outreach on prevention strategies.

Media Outreach

¶7. (U) The A/DCM's visit generated positive media attention both regionally and nationally. During stops at a local radio station and during a taped TV interview, the A/DCM discussed USG efforts in the region with regard to development and security matters. Several major national daily newspapers noted the USG's attendance at the Conference and praised the USG's commitment to the development of

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Mindanao.

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